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SUBJECT: TURKEY: DIVERSE WOMEN LEADERS FIND COMMON GROUND

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¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Charge d'Affaires hosted a lunch December 17 to honor individuals at the forefront of eliminating violence against women. The event brought together prominent female parliamentarians, academics, NGO leaders, think-tank analysts, and activists. It prompted broad discussion from different ideological viewpoints on women's issues, and came to consensus on the major issues facing women in Turkey today: education, employment, and political participation. END SUMMARY.

Education

¶12. (SBU) During a luncheon hosted by the Charge d'Affaires on December 17, education stood out as one of the most pressing problems for women in Turkey. The academics in the group stated that many women who are living in big cities have easy access to some type of education. However, women who are living in small cities and towns do not have the same access. Our contacts underlined that although the data reflecting female enrollment in primary education seems high, the drop-out rate of female students is also very high. These uneducated women often are unaware of their basic legal rights and are easily swayed by cultural pressure from their communities and families. Our contacts criticized the government's promotion of female education as insufficient and stated that most successful projects have been done by NGOs. Participants claimed that these organizations do not receive enough support or funding from the government.

Employment

¶13. (SBU) Our contacts indicated that the number of women in the government only constitutes 24 percent of the workforce. The number of women working in the private sector is much lower. According to the participants, the major factors that affect the low employment rates of women are: the male-dominated cultural structure, social focus on the women's role in the family as the caregiver, and the Government's statements and messages about women as a dependent family member rather than as an individual who shares the responsibility of the family's income. Prime Minister Erdogan's recent public advice to women that they need to have at least three children received harsh criticism from some at the table, and sparked a heated debate between members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP -- Erdogan's party) and the more

secular participants. They all agreed, however, that the government need to publish messages that empower women, both within the family and in public life.

Women in Politics

14. (SBU) Another problem for women in Turkey is the low rate of representation in the parliament and within municipal governments. The NGO members stated that they have been fighting for this issue for many years. However, there is only so much they can do without help from the government. The election laws need major revisions, they said, but none of the political parties are willing to take the initiative on this issue. As a result, the percentage of women in the parliament is only 9.1 percent and the percentage of women who serve in local governments is as low as 0.05 percent. The female MPs at the luncheon complained that they often receive biased comments from their male counterparts, such as "Sister, why are you here? Go home and take care of your children." This prompted some rueful smiles around the table. Our guests agreed that the election laws urgently need to be revised, a quota system should be implemented, and their male counterparts should be trained on sensitivity to gender equality issues.

There is a Hope

15. (SBU) Despite improvements moving at a snail's pace, our guests stated they are still optimistic about the future of women in Turkey. They applauded former State Minister for Women's Affairs Nimet Cubukcu's effort to open women's shelters in provinces that have a population of fifty

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thousand or more. All of our guests also stated that the government has taken bold steps on women's issues during Turkey's EU accession reforms. State Minister for EU Affairs Egemen Bagis has hired nine female directors for the EU General Secretariat. Parliament has approved the opening of a new Equal Opportunity Commission for Women and Men during the accession process, which was seen as the product of a decades-long struggle by women activists. Participants said that their active lobbying in Europe and collaborative work in Turkey also paid off during the EU accession reforms process. Turkey's 2009 EU Progress report reflected 85 percent of their comments on women's issues in Turkey. Although they were encouraged by these developments, there is still a lot more to do.

Comment

16. (SBU) The lunch actually began with some tension. Two of our guests -- a woman wearing a headscarf and another woman from the AKP -- were not welcomed by the secular women activists and academics, who literally turned their back to them when they arrived. However, it did not seem to take long for all the guests to realize that they were all fighting for the same women's issues. The lunch discussion allowed these divergent groups, who normally do not communicate with one another, to open up lines of communication. We were pleased to see that by the end of the lunch, the most secular women and the conservative women who wore head scarves were exchanging cards and chatting animatedly. Indeed, they continued their lively discussion outside, despite the rain. There may be a long way to go for equality between women and men in Turkey, but the vibrant debate among women bodes well.

SILLIMAN